What do you say? What do you do? I wish I knew the answer. Cassie is really fearful of my disappearance? How is... that possible? I nearly got us killed. Twice, at least. I suppose it gives me an activity. I can either mull over the sickness, mull over the boredom, or mull over part of this impossibility. It seems to be on the crossroads of feeling and fear. At least, that's what I've been able to guess. I don't dare question her for the answer.

The sticks are finally dry so I can once again attempt something that I know will fail. I rub them together, pleading to the stars above to start some sort of embered spark. At least I'm not disappointed when none comes after one of the branches snaps into two. How did the other fire-starter clichés go? Some guy bangs rocks together and a spark comes flying out? Worth a shot, I guess.

Rocks are easy enough to find in the cave. And they have a similar result. The only difference between rubbing the sticks together and banging the rocks together is that the rocks make a much more annoying sound. They bang into each other, leave white marks on each other, and do little else but get Cassie to complain about the noise.

I throw the rock at the wall and it breaks into pieces. I stand at the mouth of the cave and watch the water pounce upon the ground. A feeling of zen embarks its way through my body and I collapse into the mud behind me. I just watch the world once more until the serenity is dashed by a shot of fear. I see the bear, or a bear, roaming around the woods looking for a shelter of some kind.

"Cassie," I whisper. "We have to get out of here now."

She doesn't question it. I thank my lucky stars as she takes my hand. We enter the sprinkling waters and Cassie stops moving. Apparently that was my lucky stars fizzling out. The bear paws at a tree down the way, its claw tearing into the bark. It's easy to see peeling flesh in its place. I know about as much about bears as I do about explosives: they can and will kill you if you're not careful.

Being careful is definitely not my strong suit. I try pull Cassie out of her trance to no avail. She's intent on staring at that thing. I'd rather not be reminded of yesterday's incident, but Cassie isn't giving me many options other than picking her up and

getting the hell out of here. And the bear eyes us.

I don't take my eyes off of the thing. It's not moving quickly, but it is stepping towards us. I step sideways, away from the mouth of the cave, pulling Cassie with me. The bear is just looking for shelter, that's it. It probably wants to get into the cave behind me. That's it. I step backwards and find my back pressed against jagged stones piercing out of the cliff. The beat steps forward and creates disgruntled noises from the brunt of the storm.

Cassie screams. The bear starts moving closer to us. I see my reflection in its eyes. Then I hear. I hear a loud bang. It's not the lightning. A trickle of blood streams down the bear's face. The creature seems to be mulling over the fact that it is indeed dead as it topples over.

"Thought I heard something from over here," says a man who arrives on the scene. "Are you two okay?"

"Um yeah..." I say. I nudge the bear with my foot. It's dead. Hallelujah. But who is this guy?

"What brings you two out here? Get lost on a hike or something?"

"Um yeah," I say. "Me and my... niece, we've been lost out here a couple days now. Thanks for... helping. If it wasn't for you, I don't know what would have happened."

"I think you've got an idea," the guy tells me. He slings his rifle back over his shoulder. He examines the bear. "Damn runts. Not supposed to be killing bears anyway. You two are welcome to stay at our campsite. We could scrounge up some grub, and even get you back to civilization."

My head cold doesn't manage to stop the occasional twinges of logic that still bounce around my mind. I'm a wanted fugitive, and Cassie is a kidnapped child. If he has a cell phone, or any means of contact with the rest of the world, then our

little journey is over. Then again if I refuse this man's help, it'll be game over soon anyways. I look to the splintered sticks and chalked rocks in the cave.

"Thank you," I say. And I let out a faux-innocent chuckle. "Thought we were goners."

We walk through the wooded groves. Cassie tightly clenches my hand. I barely notice. I'm far too focused on the rifle that bounces back and forth on the man's back. The only thing that forces me to blink is the rainwater stinging my eyes. The man says nothing. I can only attempt to pierce the barriers of reality and scour his mind for his assumptions and intentions. Is he the good Samaritan, eager to do a decent deed of this caliber? Is he listening to the temptress of the law, trying to sink his hooks under my skin and bring us both into the presence of justice?

I feel the wind beat against my bare chest. I can assume that he can connect the dots to paint a heinous picture. Out in the woods with a little girl isn't exactly a scenario you'd find the saint or even the every-man in. Perhaps he bought my story though. If that's the case the man is a fool, and he's overpaying way too much. Cassie doesn't look anything like me. Why would he believe that she's my niece? Why the hell did I make up a lie like that?

I stumble over a tree root and Cassie follows. There's a glint in the man's eye as he directs his gaze towards us. I return a look that desperately shouts the truth, that wants the farce to just end once and for all. Deafness has never been such a blessing and such a curse simultaneously. He doesn't hear the plea. As soon as we've recovered from the stumble it's right on walking en-route to wherever I don't know.

Smoke rises above the canopy in the distance. We're getting closer to the answer. My salvation or my purgatory lies in wait, ready to snap the trap. It won't be long, but it's still enough time for my mood to run sing a song of dread. The requiem stings my ears as it jabs my mind again and again sinking into the deepest and darkest crevasses therein. The chaotic harmony becomes echoed by sounds of jovial jest.

"Lookie what I found," says the hunter.

Two other men are sitting around a campfire. One of them is too busy pounding on a radio and playing with it's antennae to notice us. The other one lowers a can of beer away from his lips and stares at the three of us with a quirked brow.

"Josh," says the hunter, "I told you that radio wouldn't work when left. Why are you still messing with it?"

"Nothing better to do out here—" Josh, apparently, says before he turns to us. "So, who are these guys?"

"Don't know. Found them out in the woods. Said they were on a hiking trip and got a little lost. Nearly got torn apart by a bear."

"Hi, I'm Alex," I say the first name that crosses my mind, "and this is my niece... Jessica."

"But my name's not—"

"Sorry, she prefers Jamie," I say.

I try to shoot her a look to tell her to just go with it. I don't know if truly works, but it manages to stop Cassie from trying to bring the truth to the masses. Then she returns a look towards me. I don't know what it is, but it seems to hurt all the same. I don't see it long to gauge her thoughts or emotions; she turns away far too quickly for that. The only thing she manages to tell me is that I've done something wrong.

The three campers offer us food. I'm not in much of a position to say no. I never really cared for the standard lunch-meat sandwiches and chips, but after two days of eating nothing but semi-rotten fruit or nothing at all, my tastes don't protest. They squeal in delight at the mere prospect of food. Cassie is eating too, which make the morsels go down much easier.

Conversations uprise. They begin to ask what the hell we were doing that got us so lost and beaten. I spin stories halfheartedly. It doesn't really matter what I say, they seem to buy it all the same. I'm too focused on Cassie. She won't even look at me. I am forced to wonder why. All I did was call her Jessica. Is that a name that she doesn't like? No, that's a stupid reason. No one looks at you like that just because they don't like an alias you have presented them. That was a look of betrayal, harking back to the time I returned to the cavern and Cassie flipped out. What have I done this time?